

“Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?”

The Kansas Years of Wilt the Stilt

by Aram Goudsouzian

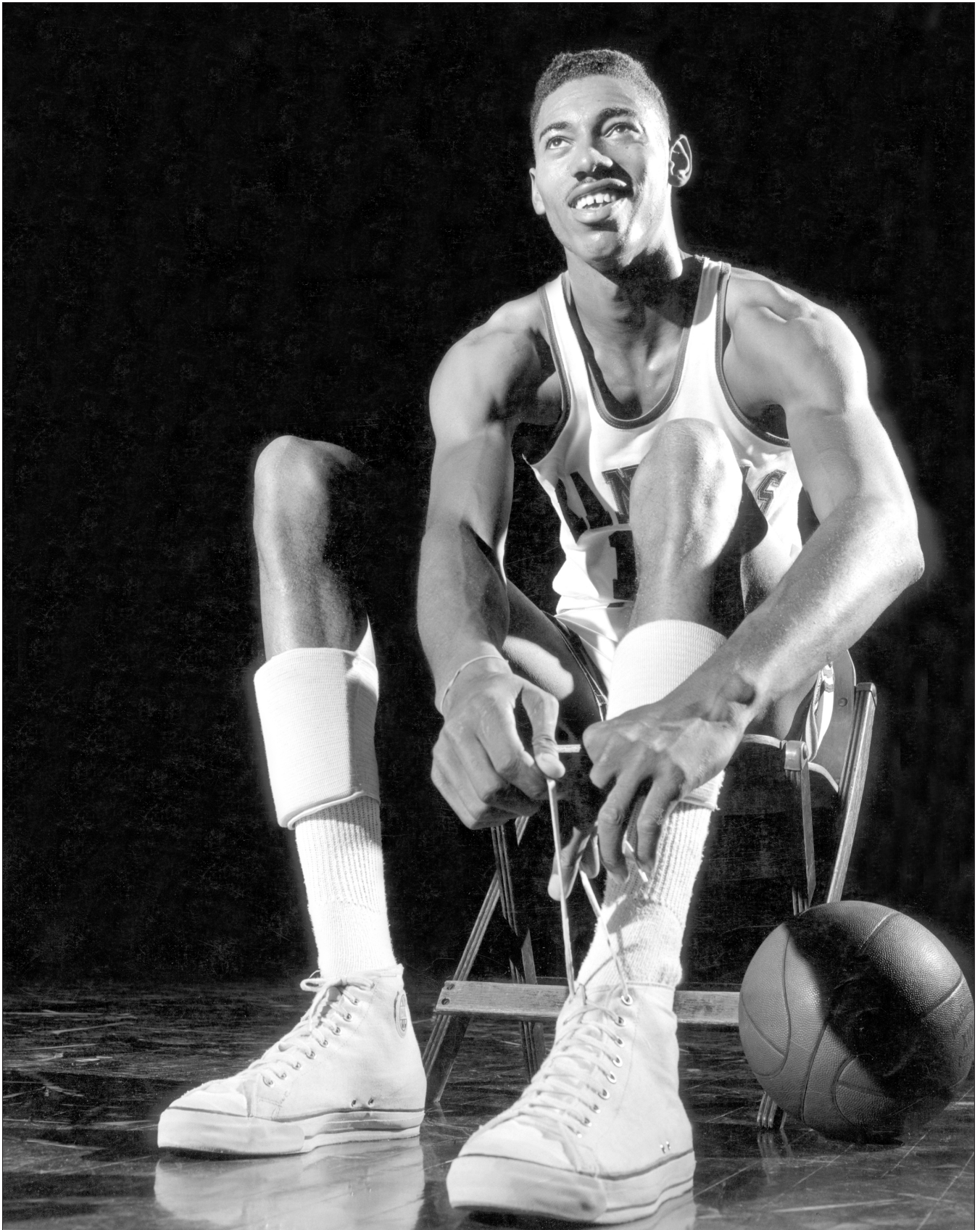
It would be called the greatest college basketball game ever played, but it began with a scene of utter absurdity—a basketball burlesque. The 1957 NCAA Final was a landmark event in American sports history, broadcast by an unprecedented number of radio and television stations. It matched the University of North Carolina, undefeated and ranked number one, against the University of Kansas, twenty-six and two and ranked number two. The Kansas center was Wilt Chamberlain, the most dominant player in college basketball, a spidery seven-foot giant with breathtaking agility and awesome strength. When this huge black man strode to the center circle, the parody began. Jumping center for North Carolina was Tommy Kearns—a guard, and only 5’10”. It looked ridiculous. The cool Colossus loomed over the ashen pygmy. Kearns hammed it up, bending his knees as if he might win the tip.¹

That opening tip transcended farce. It also captured a popular perception of Wilt Chamberlain as a big black threat, a force that altered his sport’s very structure. His presence assaulted the sensibilities of the basketball establishment, and his race underlay that menace. Chamberlain presaged the African American ascendancy in sports during the 1960s. Moreover, thanks to both his athletic gifts and compelling persona, Chamberlain inspired extraordinary amounts of national publicity. He was college basketball’s first genuine celebrity, a player whose on-court style and off-court personality ushered the sport into the modern era.²

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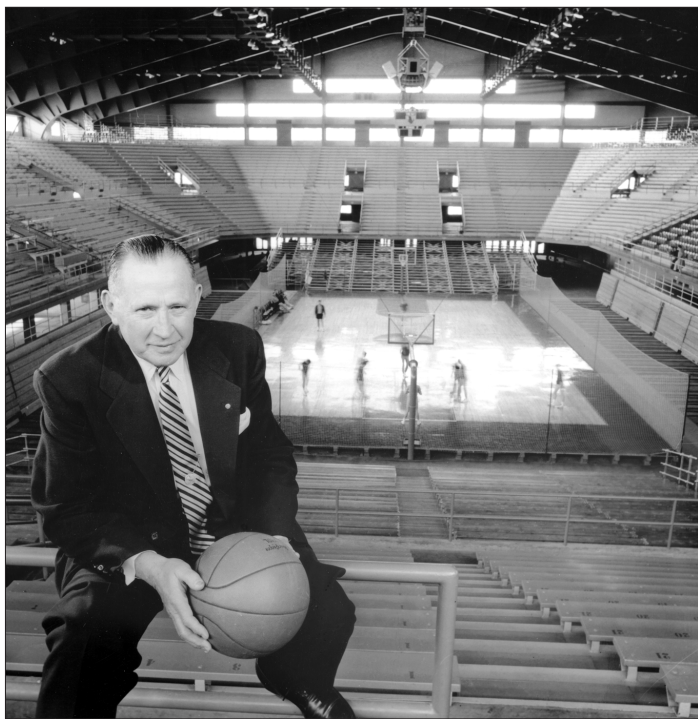
1. Frank Deford, “A Team That Was Blessed,” *Sports Illustrated* (March 29, 1982): 70.

2. Bill Mayer, interview by author, January 6, 2005; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 224. Chamberlain’s biographers have aptly told the story of his Kansas years but failed to analyze its larger impact upon American culture. See Robert Cherry, *Wilt: Larger Than Life* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004), 43–71; Bill Libby, *Goliath: The Wilt Chamberlain Story* (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1977), 26–45.



Wilt Chamberlain at the University of Kansas.

"CAN BASKETBALL SURVIVE CHAMBERLAIN?"



Longtime basketball coach Forrest C. “Phog” Allen secured “The Big Dipper” to play at the University of Kansas beginning in 1955. That same year the university christened its new \$2.65 million field house named for the legendary coach.

Kansas would lose the 1957 NCAA Final. The game would reflect both Chamberlain’s individual achievement and the disappointment that plagued his tumultuous tenure at Kansas from 1955 to 1958. Throughout these years Chamberlain stood at the center of upheavals at the University of Kansas: his presence inspired national controversy, and he personally helped effect the racial desegregation of Lawrence. Yet Chamberlain was a considerably more complicated figure than an integrationist pioneer in the mold of Jackie Robinson. He was a national icon, but one defined as much by failure as success. His size, ability, and race threatened the established patterns of college basketball. During his Kansas years Wilt Chamberlain foreshadowed the changing landscapes of American sports and race relations.³

3. By considering Wilt Chamberlain as both a complex human being and a complicated racial icon, this article seeks to broaden historical understanding of the political role of the black athlete. Civil rights historians such as Timothy Tyson (*Radio Free Dixie*, University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and Barbara Ransby (*Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004) have complicated easy dichotomies of racial integration and Black Power. In the same vein, this article seeks to examine the iconography of a black athlete who fits neither the integrationist mold of Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis nor the defiant image of Jack Johnson or Muhammad Ali. See Thomas R. Hietala, *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: Free Press, 1983); William J.

Chamberlain had a national reputation by his senior year at Overbrook High School in Philadelphia. During his three seasons from 1952 to 1955, Overbrook won fifty-eight games and lost only three, and it was city champion his final two years. Nicknamed “Wilt the Stilt” (which he hated) and “The Big Dipper” (which he liked), Chamberlain averaged 47.2 points a game his senior year. *Life* proclaimed him the nation’s best high school player, a prodigy who had matched up against the best collegians in the ultra-competitive summer leagues in the resorts of the Catskills. At the time the National Basketball Association had a territorial draft designed to place area college stars with their local professional teams. The Philadelphia Warriors drafted Chamberlain when he was a senior in high school, even though league rules prohibited him from joining them until his class graduated from college.⁴

Chamberlain attracted the attention of basketball coaches around the country, including Forrest “Phog” Allen of the University of Kansas. By 1955 Allen was a legend. That year the university had christened the \$2.65 million Allen Field House, despite a policy barring the naming of buildings after living persons. The quirky, silver-tongued educator frequently expounded on such esoteric subjects as the proper way to gargle—sometimes standing on his desk, dressed only in underpants. He also pioneered modern basketball coaching. Inheriting the Kansas program from James Naismith, the sport’s inventor, Allen adopted formal, scientific approaches to coaching players.

Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Donald McRae, *Heroes Without a Country: America’s Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens* (New York: Ecco, 2002); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, exp. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Elliott J. Gorn, ed., *Muhammad Ali: The People’s Champ* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

4. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 11, 1955; “The Giants of Schoolboy Basketball,” *Life* 38 (February 21, 1955): 59–62; Terry Pluto, *Tall Tales: The Glory Years of the NBA, in the Words of the Men Who Played, Coached, and Built Pro Basketball* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 213–17.



In 1948 Coach Allen raised the ire of Indiana basketball fans when he "stole" Clyde Lovellette, nicknamed "The Terre Haute Terror," from Indiana University. With Lovellette KU would win the NCAA Championship in 1952.

Cherishing the structure of half-court basketball, he famously adopted the pet cause of raising the basket from ten to twelve feet, yearning for the day when "these dream men whose heads just graze the rim of the baskets and who with one hand dunk the balls through the hoops, like children inserting pennies in gum machines, may yet have to seek another sport in which to excel."⁵

For all his innovative spirit, Allen was slow to begin recruiting. But in the late 1940s Jack Gardner of Kansas State in Manhattan started consistently beating Allen with recruited players. Phog adapted. In 1948 he stole 6'9", 240-pound Indiana high schooler Clyde Lovellette from Indiana University with a charming, aggressive sales pitch. The "Terre Haute Terror" led Kansas to its first NCAA title in 1952. By the 1950s college basketball programs everywhere were seeking to vault their programs to excellence by recruiting outstanding stars.⁶

Chamberlain inspired the first national recruiting campaign in college basketball history. More than two hundred

schools vied for his attention. "Every day when I'd come home from school," he told *Sports Illustrated*, "somebody would be in my living room, there would be four or five letters on the bureau and my mother would tell me at least two people called long distance and would call back later." He wanted to leave Philadelphia and took trips throughout the Midwest. By the spring of 1955 Chamberlain's college destination had become a matter of national speculation.⁷

The University of Kansas delivered the most comprehensive recruiting campaign. Chamberlain received more than five hundred letters from alumni and school officials imploring him to attend the University of Kansas. Phog Allen dispatched his son Mitt to the Catskills to schmooze the young star. In January 1955 Phog visited Philadelphia, speaking at a banquet honoring Chamberlain and charming his mother, Olivia. She was further impressed by a visit from chemistry professor Cal Venderwerf, the only teacher to visit the family. Accompanied by his coach Cecil Mosenson, Wilt visited the campus two weeks later. Alumnus Skipper Williams housed him, allowed him use of his car and guitar, and fed him steak for breakfast.⁸

5. Blair Kerkhoff, *Phog Allen: The Father of Basketball Coaching* (Indianapolis: Masters Press, 1996), 69–99, 178–82; Forrest C. Allen, *Better Basketball: Technique, Tactics and Tales* (New York: Whittlesley House, 1937), 83.

6. Kerkhoff, *Phog Allen*, 159–69; Mike Fisher, *Deaner: Fifty Years of Kansas Athletics* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1986), 193–94; Max Falkenstein, interview by Doug Vance, *Max and the Jayhawks: 50 Years On and Off the Air with KU Sports* (Wichita: Wichita Eagle and Beacon Publishing, 1996), 36–38.

7. Wilt Chamberlain with Tim Cohane and I. R. McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," *Look* 22 (June 10, 1958): 94, 98; Jimmy Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," *Saturday Evening Post* 229 (December 1, 1956): 106; "Seven-Foot Freshman," *Sports Illustrated* (August 22, 1955): 11.

8. Roy A. Edwards to Franklin D. Murphy, March 16, 1959, Athletic Office—NCAA Chamberlain, box 1, Chancellor Franklin D. Murphy Correspondence Departmental, 1958/59, University Archives, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence (hereafter cited as University Archives); Murphy to Walter Byers, March 19, 1959, *ibid.*; C. A. Vanderwerf to Murphy, *ibid.*; "Wilt: Larger Than Life"; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 30, 1955; *Lawrence Journal-World*, February 12, 1955; Chamberlain with Cohane and McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," 100; "What It Took to Get Wilt," *Life* 40 (January 28, 1957): 114.

Chamberlain narrowed his choices to Kansas, Dayton, Michigan, and Indiana. He preferred schools that emphasized basketball, which eliminated football-mad Michigan. He crossed off Dayton after eating room service throughout a recruiting trip; his courtiers were hiding him from the city's segregated restaurants. Chamberlain had also heard rumors that Indiana coach Branch McCracken was racially prejudiced. "Where we outrushed Indiana," claimed Allen, "is we showed him how successful the Negro in Kansas was." In fact, Lawrence and Bloomington shared patterns of *de facto* racial segregation, and McCracken and Allen bore similar prejudices. As athletic director, Allen had excluded blacks from varsity athletics; when the Big Six athletic conference formed in 1927, he approved the "gentleman's agreement" prohibiting blacks. In 1947 when the athletic department opened varsity sports to blacks, Allen publicly suggested that blacks run track because "that didn't require as much body contact as basketball." Yet Chamberlain would become the basketball program's third African American. Reserve player LaVannes Squires finally integrated the team in 1950, and Maurice King was one year ahead of Chamberlain.⁹

Allen, Athletic Director A. C. Lonborg, and alumnus Clarence McGuire used prominent area African Americans to recruit Chamberlain. *Kansas City Call* editor Dowdal Davis accompanied Allen to Philadelphia and became a frequent correspondent to Chamberlain. Concert singer Etta Moten and businessman Lloyd Kerford also trumpeted the opportunities for the region's blacks. The Kansas recruitment strategy cast Chamberlain as an ambassador of black goodwill, and it worked. "I want to do my race some good," Chamberlain said. In May he decided to attend Kansas.¹⁰

The announcement sparked accusations that Kansas had bought Chamberlain's services. The regulatory tentacles of the NCAA did not then stretch as far as today, but odors of foul play had wafted throughout the recruiting process. Branch McCracken of Indiana claimed that an agent had demanded fifty-two hundred dollars plus room,

board, and tuition for a player, later revealed to be Chamberlain. (Phog Allen crowed that McCracken was still sore about losing Clyde Lovellette). New York reporters had long considered their region the center of college basketball. Although the 1951 point-shaving scandals originating at Madison Square Garden had diminished that status, Chamberlain's decision prompted their snickers. "I feel sorry for the Stilt," wrote *New York Daily Mirror* columnist Leonard Lewin. "When he enters the NBA four years from now, he'll have to take a cut in salary."¹¹

The intrigue kept swirling around Chamberlain when he again visited Lawrence during the Kansas Relays. "Everybody, it seems, has something to say about Chamberlain," noted the *Lawrence Journal-World*. While Allen beamed a Cheshire cat grin, rival coaches and KU alumni speculated upon the star's impact. Chamberlain also spoke with Chancellor Franklin D. Murphy, who impressed upon the young man his responsibilities. Murphy warned him that boosters would dangle carrots of temptation, and he exhorted Chamberlain to maintain high moral standards.¹²

The idealistic Murphy and the ambitious Allen were curious allies, but the chancellor had embraced the recruitment of Chamberlain. Since taking office in 1951 he had envisioned the restoration of Lawrence's historic "free state" legacy. He supported civil rights activism and believed that Kansans' enthusiasm for Chamberlain would foster greater racial tolerance. But his idealism was tempered by the reality of big-time college basketball recruiting. Chamberlain's father, William, was a janitor at Curtis Publishing, which issued the *Saturday Evening Post*, edited by KU alumnus Ben Hibbs. The magazine editor and another alumnus lobbied Chamberlain's parents. "I never wanted to know how they did it," Murphy later said, "but I guess that they got Wilt's dad promoted or something. Anyway, they convinced him to come."¹³

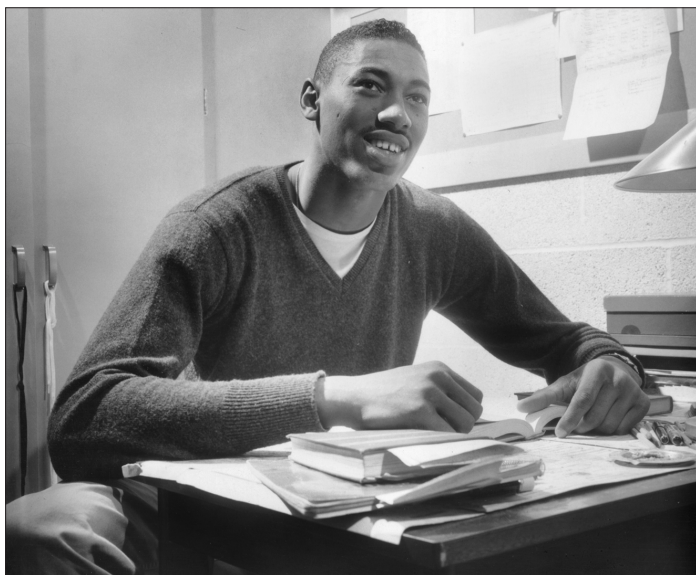
9. Chamberlain with Cohane and McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," 98–100; "What It Took to Get Wilt," 114; Kristine M. McCusker, "'The Forgotten Years' of America's Civil Rights Movement: The University of Kansas, 1939–1961" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1994), 21–38, 110–41.

10. "What It Took to Get Wilt," 113–15; *Kansas City Star*, December 6, 1956; Edwards to Murphy, March 16, 1959; Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," 108; *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 14, 1955.

11. Jerry Izenberg, "The Day Goliath First Fell," *Sport* (March 1980): 46; Chamberlain with Cohane and McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," 101; *Lawrence Journal-World*, January 24, 1957; Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?" 106. On college basketball scandals, see Stanley Cohen, *The Game They Played* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); Charles Rosen, *Scandals of '51: How the Gamblers Almost Killed College Basketball* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

12. *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 21, 1955; Report No. 27, NCAA Committee on Infractions, October 17, 1960, Athletic Office—NCAA, 1960–61, Chancellor W. Clarke Wescoe Correspondence Departmental, 1960/61, University Archives.

13. Nancy Kellogg Harper, "Higher Education Leadership: Franklin D. Murphy in Kansas, 1948–1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1995), 98–127, 138.



Chamberlain arrived in Lawrence as a campus celebrity. Newspapers ran photographs of him all over campus: standing next to short people, talking to kids, meeting with Coach Allen, studying, eating, lying in bed.

Chamberlain arrived in Lawrence as a campus celebrity. Swiveling heads followed the big man's path, and astonished undergraduates remarked, "You are tall, aren't you?" Chamberlain lived in Carruth-O'Leary Hall, where he slept on a specially made seven-and-a-half-foot bed. Like all freshmen, he was ineligible for varsity athletics, but students, professors, reporters, and assorted fans vied for his attention. In October he escorted the carnival queen to an annual benefit for the local YMCA. In December he attended a Christmas party at an orphanage for black children in Leavenworth, and that same month he spoke to a group of wide-eyed *Journal-World* carrier boys. Newspapers ran pictures of Chamber-

lain all over campus: standing next to short people, talking to kids, meeting with Coach Allen, studying, eating, lying in bed. Before the annual varsity-freshman homecoming game on November 18, one newspaper published a photograph of Allen Field House towered over by a superimposed Chamberlain—a black Godzilla arriving from the urban Northeast.¹⁴

14. "Seven-Foot Freshman," *Sports Illustrated* (August 22, 1955): 10–11; *Kansas City Star*, September 7, 1955; *University Daily Kansan*, November 18, 1955, December 4, 1956; unidentified clippings, October 11, 28, November 16, 1955, 1955 folder, Wilt Chamberlain [Biographical] file, University Archives; *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 16, 17, 1955; *University Daily Kansan*, September 12, November 1, 21, 1955. See also photographs throughout vol. 7, KU Athletics Scrapbook, University Archives.



Thousands of fans packed the field house when the freshman basketball team, led by Chamberlain, faced off against the varsity players. Chamberlain scored forty-two points, and the freshmen won eighty-one to seventy-one, their first victory since the series started in 1932.

Phog Allen called him “the best I’ve ever seen.” Although assistant Dick Harp ran the freshman team, Allen tutored Chamberlain twice a week, teaching him how to spin the ball off the backboard (he called it “pronation”) and lending him Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (“to develop his sense of feel and touch”). Meanwhile, the varsity, picked to finish first or second in the Big Seven, lost star Dallas Dobbs to academic problems and ended up in fifth place. Only visions of Chamberlain succored the Jayhawk faithful. Allen even stopped clamoring about basket heights. “Twelve-foot baskets?” he grinned to *Time*. “What are you talking about? I’ve developed amnesia.”¹⁶

Chamberlain’s freshman year was, unfortunately, Allen’s seventieth year—the mandatory retirement age for Kansas state employees. During a press conference at his eponymous field house, the coach challenged the rule, appealing to the Board of Regents by citing the disappointment of the past season, the outstanding prospects for next year, and his own good health. He wanted one season coaching Chamberlain, with all the attendant glory. Allen’s request became the region’s hot-button issue. Editorials called for Allen to resign with dignity, but the Kansas House of Representatives proposed a resolution extending his service, and letters pouring onto Chancellor Murphy’s desk supported the venerable coach. At the end of March, however, the university’s athletic board recommended that the Board of Regents deny Allen’s request. Phog had coached his last game.¹⁷

That homecoming game was Chamberlain’s warning shot, heralding the coming revolution in basketball. Fourteen thousand eager fans packed Allen Field House. Chamberlain, visibly nervous, missed some early shots. By the end, however, he had scored forty-two points, and the freshmen won eighty-one to seventy-one, their first victory since the series started in 1932. At one point Chamberlain drove from the perimeter to the top of the key and jumped. It looked as if he would take a one-hand jump shot, but he stayed in the air, turned his back to the basket, and rotated an outstretched arm over the defense for a dunk, landing behind the basket. His national reputation magnified. “The greatest basketball player in the game today,” proclaimed the *Sporting News*. “Greater, perhaps, than any player who ever lived.”¹⁵

15. *Lawrence Journal-World* (September 5, 1955, August 15, 1998); *University Daily Kansan*, November 18, 21, 1955; Breslin, “Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?,” 104; *Kansas City Times*, 19 November 1955; *Enid (OK) Daily Eagle*, 19 November 1955; *Sporting News*, 21 December 1955.

16. “Wilt the Stilt,” *Time* 66 (December 12, 1955): 61–62; *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 19, 1955; *University Daily Kansan*, September 12, December 14, 1955, February 3, March 12, 1956; *Kansas City Star*, February 9, 1956.

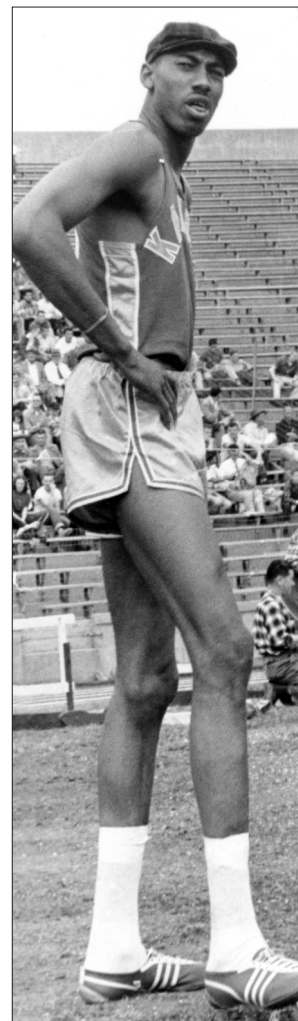
17. *University Daily Kansan*, March 15, 19, 20, 1956; Jerry Waugh, interview by author, January 10, 2005; Athletic Office, Chancellor Murphy Correspondence Departmental, 1954/55; Athletic Office, F. C. Allen, *ibid.*, 1955/56.

But Allen remained a center of attention, and Chamberlain's shadow again loomed over the hullabaloo. Harry Henshel of the Amateur Athletic Union asked why Chamberlain was not a candidate for the Olympic team. "Is Kansas trying to hide something?" he thundered. The charge spawned a verbal duel between Henshel and Allen, who also sought to profit from the services of amateur athletes. In April Allen accused Henshel of smearing Chamberlain's reputation, and Henshel filed a thirty-five-thousand-dollar libel suit.¹⁸

No athlete illustrated the tensions over amateurism more than Wilt Chamberlain. Upon his commitment to Kansas, the NCAA launched an inquiry into the university's recruiting practices. When Chamberlain enrolled in September 1955 the NCAA alleged that KU boosters had deposited five thousand dollars in escrow, to be paid Chamberlain upon finishing school. The NCAA also believed that the University of Kansas had tried to lure Chamberlain by offering his Overbrook teammate Douglas Leaman a scholarship and his coach, Cecil Mosenson, a job as assistant coach. During Wilt's freshman year NCAA investigators interviewed Mosenson, Overbrook athletic director Ben Ogden, Philadelphia businessman Jud Frommer, and basketball promoter George Besnoff. They interrogated Chamberlain for four hours in Kansas City and amassed a fat file of his press clippings. The NCAA investigation continued throughout Chamberlain's Kansas tenure.¹⁹

Meanwhile, a Cumberland, Maryland, newspaper charged that Chamberlain had played in professional exhibitions under an alias. A news service spread the story nationwide, and Henshel exploited the accusation in his sparring with Allen. Chamberlain had in fact played for pay, as would most young men of modest means. But college and Olympic sports demanded a hypocritical adherence to the amateur ideal. (For instance, five members of the 1956 Olympic team had played for semi-professional

In addition to basketball, Chamberlain excelled at track and field at the university, placing second in the high jump and fourth in the triple jump in the 1956 Kansas Relays.



teams under AAU auspices.) So Chamberlain had played under a fake name, and he had been warned against participation in the Olympics to avoid investigation into such practices. When the Maryland story surfaced, he denied the charges.²⁰

Chamberlain's freshman year ended a volatile brew of anticipation and disillusion. He worked a very visible job sweeping and selling tickets for the athletic department, ostensibly earning his sanctioned fifteen-dollar-per-week allotment. He also excelled at track and field, placing second in the high jump and fourth in the triple jump in the 1956 Kansas Relays. He arm-wrestled schoolmates Al Oerter, who would win the gold medal in the discus that summer at the Melbourne Olympics, and Bill Nieder, who would take silver in the shot put. Chamberlain once won a bet that he could shot put the farthest—he let the two Olympians go before him, and then he tossed it over his head with both hands. He loved compe-

18. Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," 106; *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 7, 1956; *University Daily Kansan*, April 9, 1956, April 10, 1956; Athletic Office—NCAA, Chancellor Wescoe Correspondence Departmental, 1955/56.

19. Walter Byers to Franklin D. Murphy, June 14, 1955, Athletic Office—NCAA, Chancellor Murphy Correspondence Departmental, 1954/55; Report No. 27, NCAA Committee on Infractions, October 17, 1960; Chamberlain with Cohane and McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," 101; Byers to Murphy, February 21, 1959, Athletic Office—NCAA Chamberlain, Chancellor Murphy Correspondence Departmental, 1958/59.

20. Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," 106; Bill Russell as told to William McSweeney, *Go Up For Glory* (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1966) 44; Wilt Chamberlain and David Shaw, *Wilt: Just Like Any Other 7-foot Millionaire Who Lives Next Door* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973) 60–61; *New York Amsterdam News*, April 14, 1956; *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 10, 1956.

Due to Allen's mandatory retirement at age seventy, Chamberlain and the Kansas basketball team were coached by Allen's longtime assistant Dick Harp, himself a former KU player.

tition and befriended like-minded athletes, challenging them to bowling or table tennis. "Wilt was never aloof, or a prima donna," recalled student John Novotny. "He was one of the gang."²¹

But Chamberlain allowed few people closer than arm's length. Since high school, he had lived under the microscope of his admirers, the media, and amateur organizations. Now Kansas fans were expecting a waltz to the national title, the media wanted juicy quotes, the amateur organizations hounded him, and black leaders coveted another Jackie Robinson. Wary of exploitation, Chamberlain had to decipher whom to trust. Although gregarious with teammates or children, he was quiet and contained in public, answering questions with a bored haughtiness. A black Goliath among white Lilliputians, he never felt entirely comfortable in Lawrence.²²

Moreover, Chamberlain felt betrayed by Allen's departure. Kansas recruiters had assured Chamberlain that the coach would sidestep the retirement law. Instead, Dick Harp would coach him. Jayhawk captain in 1940, Harp had assisted Allen since 1949. He was painstakingly loyal, ethical to a fault, and passionate about basketball. But he was replacing a legend and inheriting a ballyhooed player. For both Harp and Chamberlain, anything less than a national championship would be a failure.²³



Most preseason polls ranked Kansas the top team in the country. Ten lettermen returned. Gene Elstun had a great one-hand set shot and would start at forward for the third straight year. Maurice King, a fine jump-shooter and quick defender, had already set the Kansas single-season scoring record for guards. Lew Johnson, once a center and now a forward, was a tough rebounder with a good hook shot. Sophomores Ron Loneski and Bob Billings bore promise. But the high expectations hinged on Chamberlain. Despite missing practice in October with a "singer's node" on a vocal chord, Chamberlain was a much-hyped preseason All-American.²⁴

For the season opener against Northwestern on December 3, magazine reporters and newsreel cameras followed Chamberlain's every move from breakfast to class to dormitory to team dinner to dressing room. One newspaper had featured a full-body photograph of Chamberlain that stretched down the entire front page; Northwest-

21. Joe Pollack, "A Man of Many Duties," *St. Louis Journalism Review* (November 1999): 5; *University Daily Kansan*, April 23, 1956; *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 27, 1956, October 14, 1999; unidentified article, August 22, 1965, 1965 folder, Wilt Chamberlain [Biographical] file.

22. Mayer interview; Waugh interview; *Lawrence Journal-World*, July 27, 1997; Bob Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; 1959 folder, Wilt Chamberlain [Biographical] file; Philip Raisor: *Outside Shooter: A Memoir* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 99–100; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 69–70; *University Daily Kansan*, December 4, 1956.

23. *University Daily Kansan*, November 9, 1956, January 25, 1957, May 3, 1993; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 56–61.

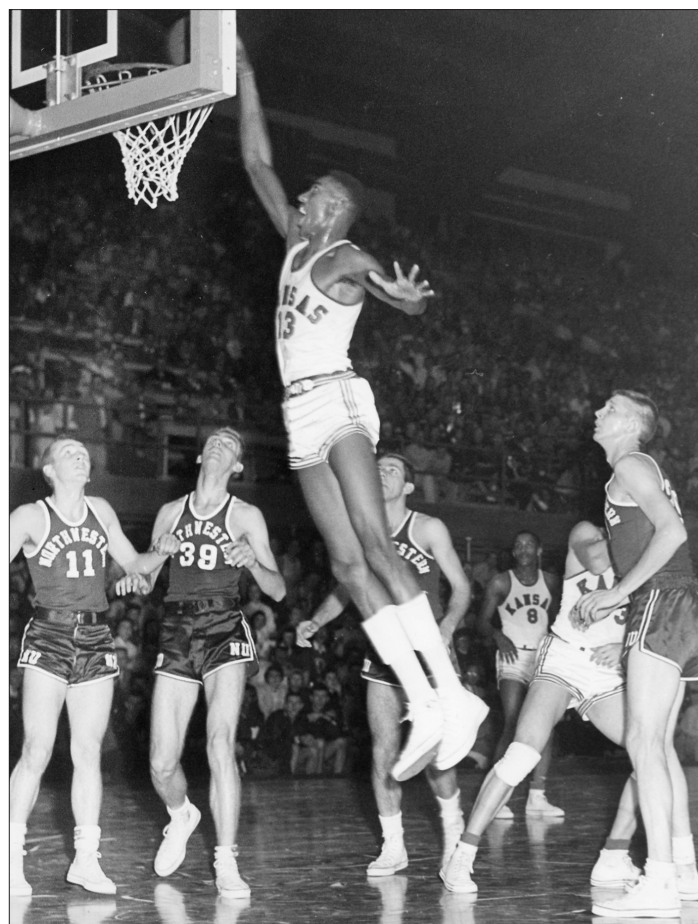
24. *University Daily Kansan*, October 16, November 9, December 3, 7, 1956; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1956.

In the 1956 season opener against Northwestern, Chamberlain scored fifty-two points and nabbed thirty-one rebounds, both KU records. Northwestern star Joe Ruklick said of Chamberlain, "He's just the greatest I've ever seen, that's all."

ern star Joe Ruklick assumed it was trick photography. Ruklick soon was awed. Chamberlain possessed an arsenal of moves and could glide downcourt in a few graceful strides. He reached over defenses for short jump shots and went through them for dunks. He scored fifty-two points and nabbed thirty-one rebounds—both KU records. Any remaining doubters recanted. "I'll admit I probably underestimated him," said Ruklick. "He's just the greatest I've ever seen, that's all."²⁵

By a mid-December West Coast road trip, Kansas ranked first in all three major polls. Three thousand people watched the Jayhawks practice in Seattle. Kansas beat Washington twice and California once. After Christmas, Kansas won the Big Seven preseason tournament. Chamberlain scored ninety-three points in three games. Opposing coaches had to base their game plans on stopping Chamberlain. Teams held the ball to slow down the Kansas attack and collapsed two or three men on Chamberlain as he neared the low post. Chamberlain suffered the shoves and chops of overmatched defenders, and as Dick Harp remembered, "It was difficult for the officials to be objective about Wilt." Chamberlain often left the court with red welts from hacks.²⁶

The gimmick defenses and slow-down styles continued during the conference schedule, but Kansas ran its

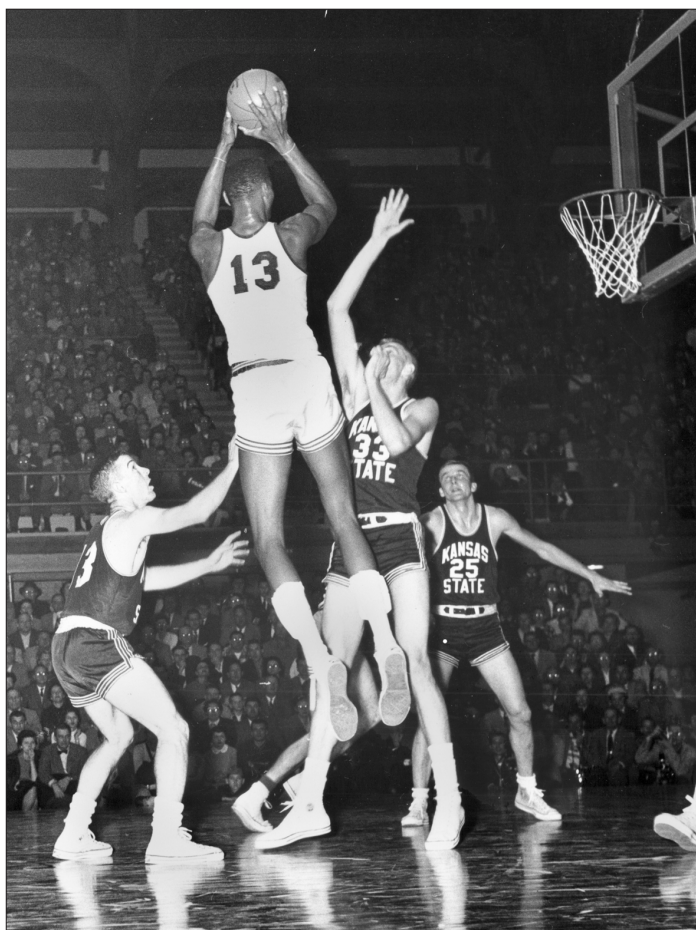


record to twelve and zero with a comeback triumph over rival Kansas State. Then, on January 14, the Jayhawks visited Iowa State. Coach Bill Strannigan played center Don Medsker in front of Chamberlain; when Kansas lobbed the ball over him, the Iowa State forwards dashed in to help, conceding open shots from the corners. Chamberlain netted only seventeen total points, and Kansas made only thirteen of forty-six shots. Iowa State, meanwhile, slowed the game down on offense, shooting only thirteen times in the second half. With the score tied thirty-seven to thirty-seven, Medsker—who had proposed to an Iowa State cheerleader that very day—sank a game-winning buzzer-beating fifteen-foot jump shot. Kansas toppled from its number-one-ranked perch. The Goliath Chamberlain had been slain.²⁷

25. *University Daily Kansan*, December 4, 1956; *Kansas City Times*, December 4, 1956; "The 7-Foot Man," *Newsweek* 48 (December 17, 1956): 96; Mayer interview; United Press article, December 4, 1956, reproduced in Wilt Chamberlain, *Who's Running the Asylum? Inside the Insane World of Sports Today* (San Diego, Calif.: ProMotion Publishing, 1997); *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 4, 5, 1956, December 3, 2002.

26. *University Daily Kansan*, December 10, 13, 17, 1956, January 3, 1957; *Kansas City Star*, January 17, 1998; *Jayhawker* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1957); *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 7, 11, 1956, December 27, 1956; Roland Lazenby, *The Lakers: A Basketball Journey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 168.

27. *Lawrence Journal-World*, January 11, 1957; *University Daily Kansan*, January 11, 14, 15, 1957; *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 21, 1957; Bill Bryson, "Cyclones Fence in Wilt on New Defense," *Sporting News* (January 23, 1957); Jeremiah Tax, "Midwinter Night's Dream Pays Off," *Sports Illustrated* (January 28, 1957): 8–9.



Critics dismissed Chamberlain as a dunker who shot awkward, one-handed free throws. But he scored on finger rolls and banked-in jump shots, passed well out of the high post, blocked shots, and ran the floor—even dishing the occasional behind-the-back pass. He is photographed here taking a jump shot against rival Kansas State.

Still, Chamberlain's hallmark was the dunk. Until the late 1950s players regarded dunking as violating the code of sportsmanship. But for a man of Chamberlain's athletic gifts, it was a high-percentage shot. Moreover, his dunks reflected the emergent ethic of urban playgrounds. Basketball courts, such future stars as Oscar Robertson and Chet Walker would contend, had been the one place that African American kids could always obtain individual recognition and respect. Thus a "black" style of basketball emerged, with an emphasis on showmanship, individual flair, and intimidation. Because this individual flamboyance came wrapped within the cooperative team ethic, cultural critics later would liken basketball to another African American art form: jazz. Chamberlain accelerated the transformation of college basketball to this style. Other players could dunk, and others were seven feet tall. Only Chamberlain, however, used the dunk as a primary weapon. It was reshaping the game. The *Kansas City Times* suggested calling the sport "Wiltball." *Ebony* tabbed him "The Man Who May Change Basketball."²⁹

The discourse surrounding Chamberlain suggested that he threatened the sport. "I told Phog that he was try-

That opposing coaches stayed awake hatching schemes to negate Chamberlain—and that *Sports Illustrated* and *Sporting News* spilled ink dissecting the Iowa State game—spoke to his revolutionary impact upon basketball. Big men had reigned over college basketball before. In the 1940s George Mikan of DePaul and Bob Kurland of Oklahoma A&M led their teams to national titles with bulk, power, and basic post moves. Bill Russell of the University of San Francisco employed agility and intelligence to dominate on defense, leading to NCAA titles in 1954 and 1955. But no one had ever matched Chamberlain's combination of size, strength, speed, and agility. Critics dismissed him as a dunker who shot awkward, one-handed free throws. But he scored on finger rolls and banked-in jump shots, passed well out of the high post, blocked shots, and ran the floor—even dishing the occasional behind-the-back pass.²⁸

28. *University Daily Kansan*, February 13, March 14, 1957; *Topeka Capital*, February 8, 1958; C. C. Johnson Spink, "Salute for 'Stilt' for Defense

Play," *Sporting News* (January 16, 1957); "University of Kansas Basketball Highlights of 1957," videotape, University Archives.

29. Pluto, *Tall Tales*, 16; Jeremiah Tax, "Animal Kingdom of the Cage," *Sports Illustrated* (December 17, 1956): 27; Oscar Robertson, *The Big O: My Life, My Times, My Game* (New York: Rodale, 2003), 18–23; Chet Walker with Chris Messenger, *Long Time Coming: A Black Athlete's Coming of Age in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 38–47; Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 7–102; Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 98–114; Todd Boyd, "The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity," in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 134–37; *Kansas City Times*, December 31, 1956; "The Man Who May Change Basketball," *Ebony* 13 (March 1957): 27–30.

Discourse surrounding Chamberlain suggested that he threatened the sport of basketball. A 1956 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* discussed that possibility as well as Chamberlain's fanatical recruitment process, the suspicion of NCAA violations, and the unique pressures for black athletes.

ing to destroy basketball by bringing that kid to school," said North Carolina coach Frank McGuire. "Chamberlain will score about 130 points one night and the other coach will lose his job. There might be somebody in the penitentiary who can handle him, but I guarantee you there is nobody in college." Implicit in McGuire's exaggerations was a recognition of the larger transformations represented by Wilt Chamberlain. McGuire lent that quote to Jimmy Breslin, who wrote a long profile for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The article discussed not only Chamberlain's athleticism, but also the fanatical recruitment process, the suspicion of NCAA violations, and the unique pressures for black athletes. Its title: "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?"³⁰

"Before Chamberlain is through," speculated *Newsweek*, "the rules of basketball may have to be rewritten several times, not merely to stop his scoring, but to preserve the game." Hank Iba of Oklahoma A&M, decrying Chamberlain, wanted the dunk shot abolished. Editorialists from the *Chicago Tribune* to the *University Daily Kansan* adopted Phog Allen's longtime plea to raise the basket to twelve feet. Allen himself pronounced the ten-foot basket "silly and ineffectual"; the center could reach two feet over the rim and "throw that ball right through the Rules Committee's collective ten-foot basket reach."³¹

The dunk and the ten-foot hoop survived, but the NCAA did change the rules to check giant centers. Before the 1955–1956 season the free throw lane was widened from six to twelve feet, so that centers could not plant themselves under the basket. Before the 1956–1957 season offensive goaltending was banned, so that players could not guide in shots from above the cylinder. Also, during his

They call him Wilt the Stilt
and colleges fought
ruthlessly to get him.
Next week he starts to play
for Kansas—and after seeing
this seven-foot superman
in action, experts ask

Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?

By JIMMY BRESLIN

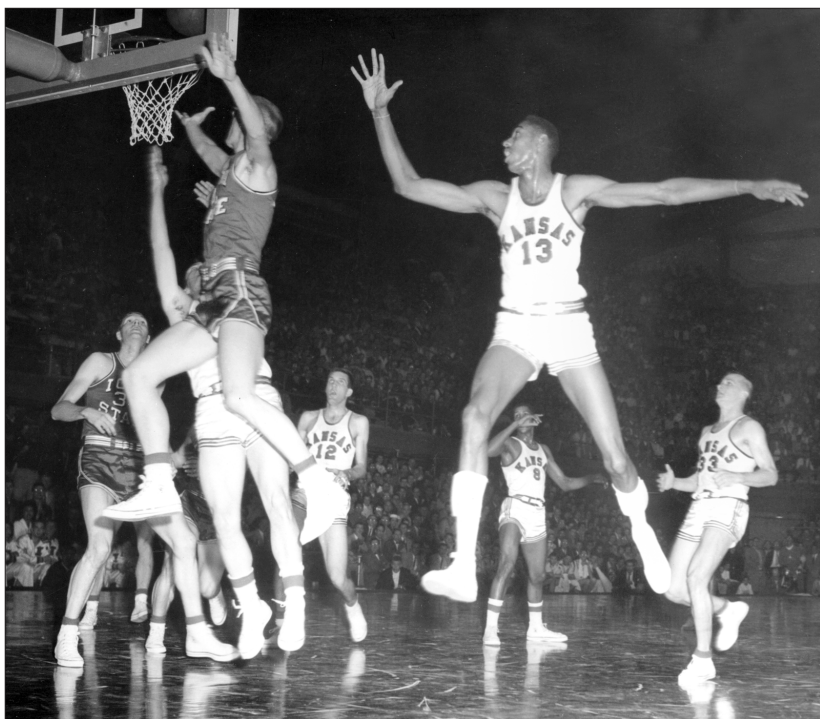
Wilton Chamberlain, a seven-foot basketball player with the catchy nickname of Wilt the Stilt, is only a sophomore at the University of Kansas. His intercollegiate playing career doesn't start until next week. Yet because of this twenty-year-old Negro athlete, many basketball authorities have already conceded the next three years to Kansas. They expect Chamberlain to be even more dominant than Bill Russell, the six-ten Negro ace of San Francisco's two-time national champions.

freshman year Chamberlain had experimented shooting free throws by running to the foul line and dunking; Tex Winter of Kansas State lobbied to outlaw this tactic before Chamberlain reached the varsity. During Wilt's sophomore year Kansas developed an inbounds play where a teammate lobbed the ball over the backboard to Chamberlain. The NCAA subsequently banned inbounds passes from under the backboard.³²

30. Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," 33, 104–8.

31. "The 7-Foot Man," 96; *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 2, 1957; "The Man Who May Change Basketball," 27; *University Daily Kansan*, 27; Kerkhoff, *Phog Allen*, 190.

32. *New York Times*, March 22, 26, 1956; *Sporting News*, December 7, 14, 1955, January 18, 1956; *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1956; William S. Lewis, "Pioneers of the Sporting Life," *Encore American and Worldwide News* (November 19, 1979): 24–25; Bill Mayer, "Wilt the Stilt," available online, www.kusports.com/basketball/history/traditions/wilt.html.



Chamberlain suffered his first defeat in January 1957 against Iowa State. Kansas avenged this loss in early February at Allen Field House, allowing KU to reclaim first place in the Big Seven.

No rule change, however, could alter the tectonic shift in college basketball culture spawned by Chamberlain. He was the sport's first celebrity, subject to unprecedented levels of fascination and criticism. The *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Chicago Defender* considered him a young black folk hero. *Sports Illustrated* and *Sporting News* marveled at his prowess. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* profiled his college experience. Jimmy Breslin wrote the long feature for *Saturday Evening Post*. *Life* documented his recruitment by Kansas. Reporters from national magazines roamed press row at Allen Field House.³³

The media scrutiny continued through the regular season. Kansas avenged its loss to Iowa State in early February, reclaiming first place in the Big Seven. The Jayhawks kept winning until February 22, when they lost to Oklahoma A&M in Stillwater. Like Iowa State, Oklahoma A&M relied on gimmickry: with the game tied at fifty-four and

3:47 left, the Aggies held onto the ball until two seconds remained, when Melvin Wright sank a twenty-foot game winner. Nevertheless, Kansas swept its remaining games, finished the regular season at twenty-three and two, and clinched the Big Seven title and an NCAA berth.³⁴

A unanimous first-team All-American, Chamberlain set school records for scoring (29.7 a game) and rebounds (18.9 a game), topping Clyde Lovellette in both categories. On ten occasions an opponent's arena sold out when Chamberlain played. Ten Kansas home games drew 150,000 customers, an increase of 85,000 over the previous year, and 160,000 others watched the team's seventeen road games. One writer estimated that Chamberlain was worth more than sixteen thousand dollars in extra highway tolls, leading some wags to dub the new eastern stretch of I-70 "The Turnpike That Wilt Built."³⁵

Chamberlain was always the center of attention, and that also took a toll. After predicting that "Chamberlain will make a million points in this conference," Jeremiah Tax of *Sports Illustrated* accused him of failing to achieve his potential. Whenever he failed to post his typical statistical output, Chamberlain weathered criticism. He grew suspicious of reporters who flattered him in person and then disparaged him in print. The local media turned sensitive, too, as eastern writers invaded the Kansas heartland. "These 'sophisticates' come out into these parts, which they sneeringly refer to as the sticks, with a pre-con-

33. *New York Amsterdam News*, April 14, 1956, January 12, 1957; *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 26, 1957; *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1956, February 9, 1957; Tex Maule and Jeremiah Tax, "The Magnetic Obsession," *Sports Illustrated* (March 25, 1957): 32–36; C. C. Johnson Spink, "Salute for 'Stilt' for Defense Play," *Sporting News* (January 16, 1957); "Wilt the Stilt," 61–62; "The 7-Foot Man," 96; *New York Times*, January 14, 1957; Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?" 33, 104–8; "What It Took to Get Wilt," 113–17.

34. *University Daily Kansan*, February 4, 11, 22, March 4, 7, 21, 1957.

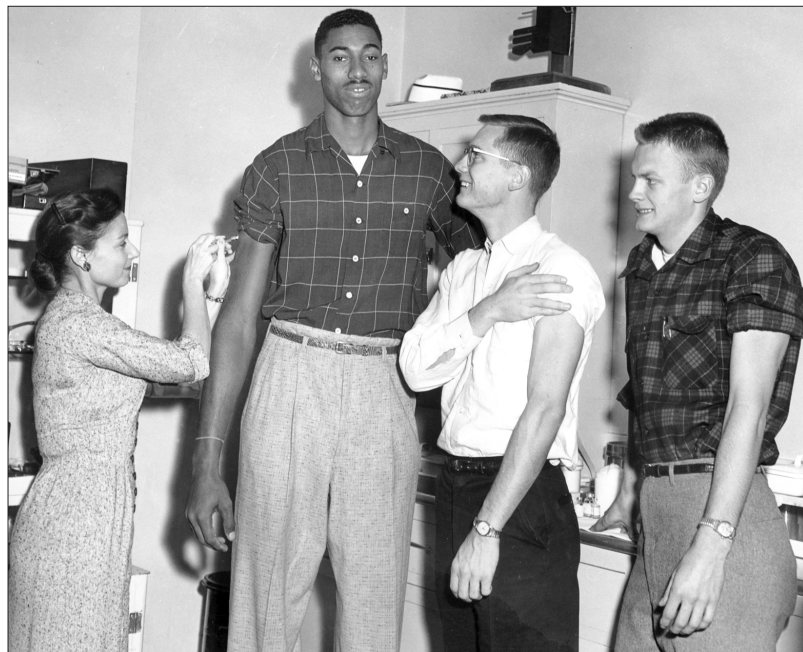
35. *Lawrence Journal-World*, February 28, 1957; *University Daily Kansan*, March 4, 1957; *ibid.*, March 8, 1957; Roy Terrell, "The American Game," *Sports Illustrated* (December 9, 1957): 27.

Chamberlain became a Kansas icon, the university's most recognizable symbol. The *Lawrence Journal-World* celebrated him as a good teammate and sportsman. The *University Daily Kansan* described his evening hours spent studying. The Kansas Board of Health used a picture of Chamberlain receiving a polio shot in its vaccination campaign. As one writer stated, "Kansas is benefiting and will benefit from the presence of this witty and gentlemanly young Negro—whether he's on or off the court."

ceived idea of what they're going to write," complained Earl Morey of the *Lawrence Journal-World*.³⁶

Chamberlain had become, in a curious way, a Kansas icon. He was the university's most recognizable symbol, yet he was its most recognizably unusual person. On a campus of predominantly white students with crew cuts, short pants, and Chuck Taylor sneakers, here was Wilt Chamberlain: tall, black, confident. Legends circulated of his epic appetite: three chickens in one sitting, ten 7-Ups in a row, a gallon of milk right after a game. He wore natty urban fashions. He was pledge master for Kappa Alpha Psi, one of the two prominent black fraternities on campus. Working a cushy job at a KU booster's auto dealership, he made only four sales, but one was to Harlem Globetrotter superstar Marques Haynes. Chamberlain loved fast cars, and he drove a 1953 Oldsmobile convertible with the license plate BIG DIPPER. He sped to Kansas City and hobnobbed with Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughn, and Johnny Mathis. In the words of broadcaster Max Falkenstein, he was a "cool cat."³⁷

But Falkenstein also noted that many older traditionalists were jarred by Chamberlain's "colossal ebony presence." As if to soften the impact, Chamberlain was lauded as a role model. The *Lawrence Journal-World* celebrated him as a good teammate and sportsman. The *University Daily Kansan* described his evening hours spent studying. The



Kansas Board of Health used a picture of Chamberlain receiving a polio shot in its vaccination campaign. A student composed a short film called "Why Wilt Chamberlain Came to the University of Kansas," in which Dick Harp said that he had the best attitude on the team. "Obviously," wrote Earl Morey, "Kansas is benefiting and will benefit from the presence of this witty and gentlemanly young Negro—whether he's on or off the court."³⁸

Chamberlain was both a threat and a goodwill ambassador, a reflection of Lawrence's shifting racial climate. In the 1950s, recalled one resident, "blacks were pretty invisible people." Housing, stores, restaurants, and movie theaters were *de facto* segregated. About 150 African Americans lived on campus each year, and over the course of the decade their status generally improved. Incoming black students historically had stayed off-campus with local black families. By the mid-1950s, blacks could live in freshman dormitories, scholarship halls, and athletic dormitories. However, black students always roomed together. An unthinking racism still governed campus race relations. For example, at the annual "Fiji Is-

36. *University Daily Kansan*, December 4, 1956, February 4, 1957; Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; *Lawrence Journal-World*, 4 January 1957, 1 February 1957, 12 February 1957, 27 July 1957.

37. Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; W. G. McDowell to A. C. Lonborg, December 5, 1958, December 11, 1958, March 4, 1959, Athletic Office—NCAA Chamberlain, Chancellor Murphy Correspondence Departmental, 1958/59; Grant Wahl, "Wilt's World," *Sports Illustrated* (November 10, 2003): 41; Max Falkenstein, interview by author, January 11, 2005.

38. Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 59–60; *Lawrence Journal-World*, February 1, 18, March 15, 20, December 12, 1957; "Why Wilt Chamberlain Came to the University of Kansas," 16 mm, 1 reel, University Archives; *University Daily Kansan*, December 17, 1957.



land Party” thrown by the fraternity Phi Gamma Delta, white students dressed like stereotyped Africans—one photograph from the 1958 yearbook captures a student wearing a bushy wig, a Tarzan-like costume, and black make-up with white around his eyes and lips, like an old-fashioned blackface minstrel.³⁹

Chamberlain arrived on a campus in the midst of racial transition. Liberal activism had intensified after World War II. In the late 1940s an interracial cooperative housing movement had begun, and the Committee on Racial Equality had formed to launch sit-ins at some segregated public facilities. In the early 1950s more than one thousand students signed a petition demanding that four downtown restaurants integrate, and a student poll indicated overwhelming support for desegregation. Chancellor Murphy also lobbied Lawrence businesses to that same end. Yet according to a 1954 survey, only seven of forty Lawrence restaurants served black customers. The Dine-A-Mite served blacks only if they kept off the dance floor.⁴⁰

“I singlehandedly integrated that whole area,” claimed Chamberlain in his 1973 autobiography. He exaggerated. But he was a central figure—perhaps *the* central figure—in Lawrence’s transition from Jim Crow to Black

Chamberlain arrived on a campus in the midst of racial transition. Most Lawrence restaurants, for example, refused to serve black customers. Then Chamberlain appeared, and he visited the Jayhawk Cafe, The Cottage, Brick’s Cafe, Rock Chalk, and other segregated establishments. He had such a presence, “the atmosphere of black–white dissolved a little bit when he was around.”

Power. Phog Allen had long accepted and enforced segregation, but while recruiting the Philadelphia star, he had begun urging local businesses to integrate. Then Chamberlain appeared, and he visited the Jayhawk Cafe, The Cottage, Brick’s Cafe, Rock Chalk, and other segregated establishments. Whites never targeted him with bitterness or hostility. He had such a presence, longtime *Journal-World* sports writer Bill Mayer explained, that “the atmosphere of black–white dissolved a little bit when he was around.” Chamberlain even befriended Roy and Mary Bergen, proprietors of the Dine-A-Mite. So the iron gates that denied Lawrence blacks full citizenship had opened a crack, if only to admit the school’s great celebrity.⁴¹

Yet to characterize Chamberlain as a civil rights crusader would be to oversimplify. “He was cognizant of the position that he had been placed in,” reflected Bob Billings, “and he realized that he was looked upon as representative of his race.” He had arrived on campus during the Montgomery bus boycott, and his varsity career began during the Little Rock crisis. With race emerging on the national agenda, black activists met stiff tests of discipline and sacrifice. Chamberlain faced such challenges, especially on road trips to Missouri and Oklahoma, where he endured racial epithets, Confederate flags, and “Dixie.” He showed a dignified restraint that recalls Jackie Robinson’s early career. The *Lawrence Journal-World* celebrated the star’s demeanor, intelligence, community service, and commitment “to further the cause of the Negro race. Already he’s done wonders in this field in his friendly, non-revolutionary way. And he’ll be doing a lot more.”⁴²

39. Rusty L. Monhollon, “Away From the Dream: The Roots of Black Power in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960–1970” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1994), 24; Amber Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years of Struggle and Success: African American History at the University of Kansas, 1870–1960” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2004), 163–93; *Jayhawker* (1956); *ibid.* (1957); *ibid.* (1958).

40. McCusker, “‘The Forgotten Years’ of America’s Civil Rights Movement,” 60–127; Reagan-Kendrick, “Ninety Years of Struggle and Success,” 186–89.

41. Chamberlain and Shaw, *Wilt*, 51; McCusker, “‘The Forgotten Years’ of America’s Civil Rights Movement,” 143; Mayer interview; Falkenstein interview. See also Raisor, *Outside Shooter*, 114.

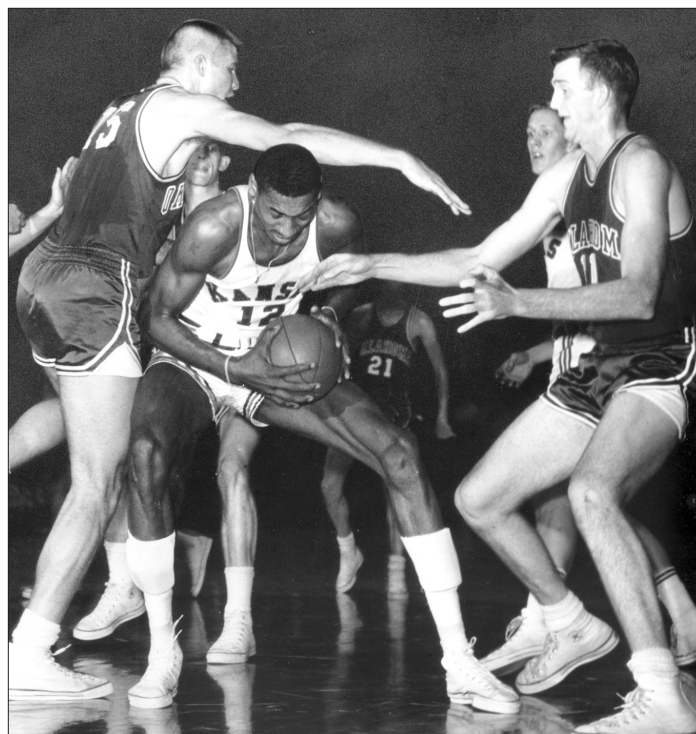
42. Billings, “My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain”; Breslin, “Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?,” 108; John Parker, “The Winners,” *American Heritage* 46 (November 1995): 42; *University Daily Kansan*, May 3, 1993; *Lawrence Journal-World*, December 17, 1955. See also Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*, 99–208.

Chamberlain faced racial challenges, especially on road trips to Missouri and Oklahoma, where he endured racial epithets, Confederate flags, and "Dixie." Photographed here at home in Allen Field House, Chamberlain is aggressively guarded by Oklahoma players.

But Chamberlain avoided a political role in the mold of Robinson or Joe Louis. "I never for one moment felt that Wilt, when he came to Kansas, was coming to be a leader in race relations," said assistant coach Jerry Waugh. In Philadelphia he had experienced little discrimination and substantial admiration. He came to Kansas with a robust ego and a sense of entitlement. So when Chamberlain walked into the Dine-A-Mite or Brick's Cafe, he did so not as a symbol but as an individual.⁴³

An October 1957 incident illustrates Chamberlain's complicated impact upon Lawrence race relations. The *University Daily Kansan* had shown a photograph of students with sock puppets from their art education class. The puppet on the left was white, smiling, and had a defined face. The puppet on the right was black with beady eyes. "No offense intended, Mr. Chamberlain," read the caption, "But that's you on the right." It recalled the black caricatures long common to American popular culture, and Chamberlain complained to Franklin Murphy. The chancellor agreed that "it was in extremely poor taste and that such lack of maturity, no matter how well-meaning, is simply inexcusable." He had chided the staff of the *Kansan*, yet Murphy also related the KU community's affection for Chamberlain. "They are proud of you, not only by way of your athletic skill but even more so because of your dignity, good humor and friendliness." Murphy downplayed the *Kansan* photograph, calling it a "tiny, passing breeze without any real significance" compared with Chamberlain's larger impact.⁴⁴

Chamberlain did break racial barriers but only on an individual level. Even after a 1959 state law "prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations," actual racial



integration in Lawrence occurred slowly. Chamberlain became a racial ambassador, and his athletic dominance suggested such superhuman heroes of black folklore as John Henry or Stagolee. Yet he was still subject to such indignities as the *Kansan* photograph, and the basketball establishment perceived him as a threat. The larger reconstruction of race relations in Lawrence, as elsewhere, would depend much more on grassroots activism than on isolated icons of black achievement and goodwill. Even though Chamberlain's restraint amidst racial indignities dovetailed with the emergent moral authority of the civil rights movement, his personal ethic transcended race. His personality and philosophy demanded that the public consider him as more than a basketball player or a black man. Wilt Chamberlain could not be reduced to either symbol or caricature.⁴⁵

43. Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; Waugh interview.

44. *University Daily Kansan*, October 28, 1957; Franklin D. Murphy to Wilton Chamberlain, October 29, 1957, Chancellor Murphy Correspondence General, 1957/58.

45. For grass roots activism and the slow desegregation of Lawrence, see Rusty L. Monhollon, "Taking the Plunge: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Desegregation in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Autumn 1997): 138–59; Monhollon, "This is America?": *The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 43–82; For black folk heroes, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 397–440.



The final game of the 1956–1957 NCAA Championship pitted Kansas against North Carolina. North Carolina collapsed up to four defenders every time Chamberlain touched the ball, jostling and frustrating the big man. When regulation play ended the score stood tied at forty-six.

"Im part of the Kansas team," said Chamberlain, "and I go wherever it goes." Kansas had thus eschewed its customary road trip to segregated Texas. However, the 1957 NCAA Midwest Regional Tournament was held in Dallas. The tournament's official hotel refused to house blacks, so the Jayhawks stayed fifteen miles away at a grimy hotel in Grand Prairie.⁴⁶

Their first opponent was fifth-ranked Southern Methodist University, a sweet-shooting team led by Jim Krebs, a six-foot-eight-inch center and second-team All-American. The tournament hosts had won thirty-five straight games at home. "Their crowd was brutal," recalled Kansas guard John Parker. "We were spat upon, pelted with debris, and subjected to the vilest racial epithets imaginable." The integrated Kansas team represented a menace to white supremacy. The referees took the mob's side, ignoring some malicious fouls on Chamberlain and Maurice King.⁴⁷

Chamberlain dictated the game's texture. On defense, Krebs had to foul him. On offense, Krebs took set shots from the corners, trying to draw him away from the bas-

ket. Chamberlain's shot blocking intimidated the whole team. "I watched Larry Showalter go up once for a jump shot," said one scout. "Chamberlain wasn't even close to him. But he went up and took his eye off the basket, backboard and all." Even so, SMU led in the second half. Kansas looked vulnerable. But Krebs fouled out with five minutes left, and the mo-

mentum turned. Gene Elstun tied the game in the final minute, Maurice King blocked the last shot in regulation, and Kansas cruised to a seventy-three to sixty-five overtime win behind Chamberlain's thirty-six points. The SMU fans launched pennies at the Jayhawks, the athletic symbols of a racially integrated future.⁴⁸

The racial implications of Kansas basketball again surfaced during the regional final against Oklahoma City. The SMU fans embraced the all-white Chiefs. They ripped down a KU banner. They booed every Kansas player. The SMU pep band played the Oklahoma City fight song. The crowd saved its nastiest barbs for Chamberlain's frequent trips to the foul line. Oklahoma City tried provoking the big center, even diving at his shins during loose balls. Coach Abe Lemons warned the referees of trouble "if that big nigger piles onto any of my kids," leading mild-mannered Dick Harp to trade screams with Lemons. Despite the tense atmosphere, Kansas pulled away by playing a perfect second half. With the game in hand, the Jayhawks endured another barrage of food, seat cushions, and pennies, and the mob howled as officials threatened a forfeit. Kansas won eighty-one to sixty-one, Chamberlain finished with thirty points and fifteen rebounds, and he and King

46. Breslin, "Can Basketball Survive Chamberlain?," 108; Parker, "The Winners," 42.

47. *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 8, 18, 1957; *University Daily Kansan*, March 12, 13, 1957; Parker, "The Winners," 42.

48. Maule and Tax, "The Magnetic Obsession," 32–36; *University Daily Kansan*, March 18, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 16, 1957.

made the all-tournament team. Police officers had to escort the team off the court and to the airport.⁴⁹

Now Kansas was two steps from the national title, and the final games would be held in Kansas City. The team arrived back in Lawrence to a sparse reception. The campus seemed assured of a national title. "After all," said one coed, "we have Wilt Chamberlain and nobody can stop him."⁵⁰

In the semifinal Kansas played the University of San Francisco, winners of the previous two championships. The Dons were nevertheless a surprise presence, because their own star center Bill Russell had joined the Boston Celtics. Sportswriters and basketball experts had been comparing the two centers all year, foreshadowing their NBA rivalry in the 1960s. They had already established a link in the public imagination. During the Jayhawks' West Coast road trip, strangers confused Russell for Chamberlain. "This really burned him up," recalled Bob Billings. Yet Russell endured the identity confusion more frequently. Russell led USF to Kansas City the previous year, capping off a fifty-five-game winning streak and a second consecutive national title. Even then, people on the street thought he was Chamberlain. By 1957 Russell had two NCAA titles and an Olympic gold medal, and he would soon lead the Boston Celtics to the first of eleven NBA championships in thirteen years. But Chamberlain was the celebrity.⁵¹

One month earlier, in fact, Russell's boss had illuminated Chamberlain's notoriety. Celtics owner Walter Brown had proclaimed that "Wilt Chamberlain should be barred from the NBA because he has proselytized himself at Kansas. No NBA team can afford to pay him what he gets at Kansas." Behind that statement lurked not only fear of a superstar joining rival Philadelphia but also moralistic revulsion of modern sport's dawning age. Phog Allen counterattacked in trademark buttery verbosity. He contrasted Chamberlain, a black man pulling himself up by the bootstraps, with Brown, "a silk-stockings boy with a fabulous inheritance." He also summoned the historic abo-

litionist links between Boston and Kansas, adding that "it is ironical that another Boston personality would try to fetter a fine Negro citizen." Allen may have been defending his own reputation, but his rhetoric of racial progress also spoke to Chamberlain's social impact.⁵²

Chamberlain's sporting impact was on display against San Francisco. "Chamberlain was Lord High Executioner," marveled *Sports Illustrated*. "He blocked, he dunked, he ran, he rebounded without a flaw." He scored thirty-two points, and Kansas rode their fast break to an eighty-to-fifty-six thrashing.⁵³

The victory set up a marquee final between number two Kansas and number one North Carolina at Kansas City on Saturday, March 23. Despite North Carolina's unblemished record, Kansas was the favorite. Chamberlain looked unstoppable, and the Tar Heels had almost lost to Michigan State in the previous night's semifinal; with the score tied at the end of regulation, the Spartans' Jack Quiggle sunk a half-court heave, but the referee ruled that time had expired. The Tar Heels needed their own buzzer beat-er to send it to a second overtime, and they finally won in the third overtime. Now Chamberlain's shadow loomed over them.⁵⁴

The game pitted the sport's past against its future. North Carolina's squad looked back to New York City, the historic heart of college basketball. Tar Heel coach Frank McGuire, a Queens native, had moved to Chapel Hill after taking St. John's to the 1952 NCAA Final. Exploiting his network of contacts and connecting to city kids with fast-talking conviviality, he brought New York basketball to the Bible Belt. By the 1956–1957 season his entire starting five—four Catholics and one Jew—hailed from New York. Tall and skilled, they played a deliberate, patterned, quick-passing, pivot-oriented offense to perfection. The style hearkened back to the old, great New York programs such as Nat Holman's City College teams. But the southward-migrating Tar Heels also reflected that New York City had lost its status as college basketball's Mecca.⁵⁵

49. *University Daily Kansan*, March 18, 19, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 18, 1957; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 66; Parker, "The Winners," 42.

50. *University Daily Kansan*, March 19, 1957.

51. *Kansas City Times*, November 30, 1956; *New York Amsterdam News*, December 8, 1956; *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 15, 1956; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 19, 23, 1957; Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; *University Daily Kansan*, March 28, 1956; *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 17, 1956; *San Francisco News*, March 16, 1957; *New York Times*, January 14, 1957.

52. *University Daily Kansan*, February 20, 1957; *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1957; *Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1957.

53. Jeremiah Tax, "Cool 32 in Kansas City," *Sports Illustrated* (April 1, 1957): 59; *University Daily Kansan*, March 21, 1957; *Kansas City Star*, March 23, 1957.

54. Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 66.

55. Mal Mallette, "Tall Tar Heels Cast Their Shadows All the Way to Kansas," *Sporting News* (January 16, 1957): 7; Richard J. Schaap, "Basketball's Underground Railroad," *Sports Illustrated* (February 4, 1957): 8–11, 43–44; Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 60–62.

Chamberlain represented the future, when black athletes would shape the texture and composition of basketball. By the 1960s Chamberlain, Bill Russell, Elgin Baylor, Oscar Robertson, and Lew Alcindor would be among the game's preeminent symbols. As the civil rights movement dismantled Jim Crow, it also injected black culture into the mainstream. Chamberlain was basketball's greatest early representative of this trend. Still, in 1957, the forces of the past and future lay in balance. The prodigious hype surrounding the final stemmed from the poetic perfection of the match-up, the juxtaposition of a crafty white squad against a menacing black giant.

Frank McGuire recognized Chamberlain's physical and psychological impact. In preparation, the coach emphasized ball control and high-percentage shots to negate Chamberlain's rebounding dominance. "I never even mentioned the Kansas team," he recalled. "I just talked about how we would defense Wilt." In the locker room, he asked every player, "Are you afraid of Wilt?" That ploy shrewdly acknowledged Chamberlain's intimidation but compelled the Tar Heels to reject it. McGuire's psychological ploys continued on the court. When he sent diminutive guard Tommy Kearns to jump center, McGuire implied that Chamberlain was a physical freak, one whose force could be withheld only by extraordinary gestures and old-school savvy.⁵⁶

North Carolina collapsed up to four defenders every time Chamberlain touched the ball, jostling and frustrating the big man. On offense, the Tar Heels shredded the Kansas zone, maintaining a deliberate tempo and swishing open shots from the perimeter. North Carolina led nineteen to nine before missing a shot. Chamberlain brought the Jayhawks back. Down twenty-nine to twenty-two at halftime, they took their first lead at thirty-six to thirty-five with eleven minutes left. But Kansas slowed the game down, failing to exploit the momentum shift, and regulation play ended at forty-six to forty-six.⁵⁷

Fatigue piled on top of pressure. Each team scored once in the first overtime. No one scored in the second overtime. By the third, psyches and tempers had worn as thin as old tires. The crowd had screamed itself hoarse, and

the air was hazy with three extra periods of cigarette smoke. During a scramble for a loose ball, Pete Brennan grabbed Chamberlain around the waist; Chamberlain tossed the ball aside and swung an elbow. The benches emptied and the coaches started arguing. "You phony," McGuire screamed at Harp. "I'll punch you in the eye." When Kearns later intentionally fouled Elstun, the players jawed again. Meanwhile, some shots started dropping, including a Chamberlain three-point play. Kansas led fifty-three to fifty-two with ten seconds left. North Carolina's Joe Quigg had the ball at the top of the key. Out came Chamberlain, wary of his opposite center's shooting touch. Quigg pump faked and drove. Chamberlain cut back, elevated, and blocked the shot. But Maurice King had left his man and fouled Quigg, who hit both free throws. Five seconds remained and Kansas trailed by one point. Harp called time out.

"Everyone in the stands—and certainly everyone on the court—knew Kansas would try to get the ball to Wilt," remembered John Parker. "The only question was how." McGuire ordered two defenders to bear hug Chamberlain if he caught the ball. Parker inbounded to Loneski, who was supposed to lob the ball to Chamberlain. Quigg batted away his weak pass. Tommy Kearns retrieved it and threw it high in the air. "Wilt was in the back of my mind," recalled Kearns, although just a tick of the clock remained. "I just figured even *he* couldn't get the ball if it was four hundred feet up in the air."⁵⁸

North Carolina fifty-four, Kansas fifty-three. A funereal pall smothered the Kansas locker room; Harp grimly snipped answers to reporters while the players sat red-eyed. Chamberlain loped outside into a light rain, and a spiteful boy ran circles around him, chirping "We wilted the Stilt, we wilted the Stilt." The Stilt stared straight ahead. Back on campus, three thousand fans greeted the team at 2:00 in the morning; Louis Armstrong played a late show and lifted spirits at the almost-victory ball. The next day, Chamberlain flew to New York City to receive the *Look* magazine All-American award on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It was small consolation.⁵⁹

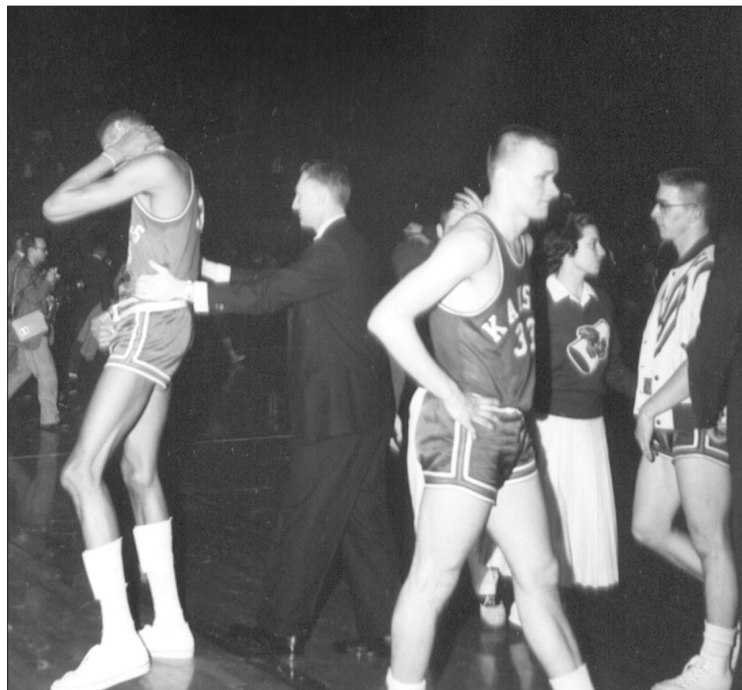
56. "Stopping the Stilt," *Newsweek* 49 (April 1, 1957): 72; Pluto, *Tall Tales*, 225; "Wilt Chamberlain: Larger Than Life," videocassette (New York: CBS, 2004); Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 66, 70.

57. Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 67; *University Daily Kansan*, March 25, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 25, 1957; Parker, "The Winners," 42.

58. *University Daily Kansan*, March 25, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 25, 1957; Parker, "The Winners," 44; Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 69–72.

59. Deford, "A Team That Was Blessed," 69; *University Daily Kansan*, March 26, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 25, 1957.

After Kansas fell to North Carolina in the NCAA Final, a funereal pall smothered the Kansas locker room, and a cloud of frustration hung over Lawrence. Both Harp and Chamberlain, at left in this photograph, became scapegoats for the loss.



A cloud of frustration hung over Lawrence. The fans muttered about Dick Harp. The coach had been placed in an impossible situation, and he lacked Phog Allen's charisma. Allen did Harp no favors by once proclaiming that "we could win the national championship with Wilt, two sorority girls and two Phi Beta Kappas." Allen also skipped the NCAA Final. "Who can say now what difference it would have made to a dog tired team to look over to the bench and see Phog sitting beside Dick Harp?" speculated the *University Daily Kansan*.⁶⁰

The other scapegoat was Chamberlain. The criticism was unfair; he had won the tournament MVP, and some teammates had played poorly in the final. But his hype had grown so prodigious that Kansas fans had assumed the title was theirs. "Wilt was not happy with us," recalled Harp. "It was very very difficult for Wilt to understand the fact that we didn't win the national championship, for him not to have been the one who brought us the national championship."⁶¹

Harp and Chamberlain never found their mutual comfort zone. The coach pressured his players to match his scrupulous standards—to study, to practice hard, to resist temptation. He tried to teach Chamberlain the fundamentals of free throws and low-post moves, and he constantly counseled the star off the court. Chamberlain resisted. His ego bulged with every celebration of his talents, and he had dominated since high school without much coaching. So he exercised, in the words of Jerry Waugh, "a polite disobe-

ence," following his own course. Whether shooting free throws or forging a social life, Chamberlain was the consummate individualist. He burned when opponents slowed the game down or triple-teamed him, because he wanted to express his talent. And he had wanted to play for Phog Allen.⁶²

So Chamberlain contemplated leaving Kansas. After two years, his initial optimism had faded. "Here at Kansas the pressure is on me," he said. "We have to win." In May rumors surfaced that Abe Saperstein of the Harlem Globetrotters had offered him a fifteen- to twenty-thousand-dollar contract. Chamberlain's telephone rang at all hours, harassing him further into his emotional cocoon. He denied any contact with professionals but did tell reporters, "It's a job. I might as well get paid." Phog Allen claimed that Chamberlain would "definitely" turn professional. At a local chamber of commerce banquet, basketball legend and guest speaker George Mikan urged Chamberlain to stay in college: "You have an obligation to yourself, your folks and the youngsters of America who look to you for leadership." Chamberlain walked out without acknowledging Mikan.⁶³

60. *University Daily Kansan*, 28 March 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 25, 1957; Chamberlain and Shaw, *Wilt*, 68; Jeremiah Tax, "Wilt Chamberlain," *Sports Illustrated*, February 10, 1958.

61. Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 69; *University Daily Kansan*, May 3, 1993.

62. Mayer interview; Waugh interview; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 63.

63. *Kansas City Times*, May 4, 1957; *University Daily Kansan*, May 6, 1957, February 3, 1958; *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 4, May 21, 1957.

As Lawrence's bars, barbershops, and basketball courts buzzed with speculation, Chamberlain started driving a new car. He had arrived on campus in a 1950 Buick. After his freshman year he traded in that car for his 1953 Oldsmobile. Now, in the spring of 1957, he sold that car for a 1956 Oldsmobile, previously owned by student Joseph Metz. As an NCAA investigation would reveal, KU alumni financed the transaction. Metz was paid twenty-five hundred dollars and delivered the car to booster Skipper Williams. The difference in value between the two cars was roughly fifteen hundred dollars, and Chamberlain paid only seventy-five dollars during the next year. Also, when Chamberlain was driving to Chicago that Memorial Day weekend, his engine blew out. Alumni paid to replace it. Considering Chamberlain's uncertain plans, the new car aroused considerable suspicion.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Kansas fans fretted. Someone surmised that Chamberlain's departure would set back integration in Lawrence twenty-five years, an exaggeration that nevertheless revealed both his symbolism and the taboo of leaving college early. Others were less sanguine. Chamberlain could stay or go, the *University Daily Kansan* mourned, "but already something intangible has left college basketball—never to return, maybe." At the end of May Chamberlain did in fact announce his return to Kansas. But his recruitment, stature, play, style, celebrity, and race had already marked the transition to modern college basketball.⁶⁵

More than ever, the Jayhawks' hopes hinged on Chamberlain. With the graduation of Lew Johnson, Maurice King, John Parker, and Gene Elstun, the only experienced players left for the 1957–1958 season were Chamberlain and Ron Loneski. Kansas had lost speed and talent, while their Big Eight rivals seemed improved.⁶⁶

The season opened against the conference's new addition, Oklahoma State. Chamberlain absorbed fans' venom and defenders' hacks, but he accumulated thirty points and fifteen rebounds in a sixty-three to fifty-six victory. The Jayhawks stayed unblemished through the rest of

1957. In a triumphant Philadelphia homecoming, Chamberlain led Kansas over St. Joseph's before a packed house at the Palestra. After the Big Eight preseason tournament, Kansas was ten and zero and ranked tops in the nation. Chamberlain looked so good that scouts considered such luminaries as Elgin Baylor and Oscar Robertson a level below him.⁶⁷

But Chamberlain missed the next two games—both losses—against Oklahoma State and Oklahoma. Officially, Chamberlain was suffering from a "glandular infection." Really, his testicles had swollen. Chamberlain later blamed an opponent's knee to the groin, but rumors churned that "The Big Dripper" had a venereal disease. (Given his 1991 claim that he had bedded twenty thousand women since turning fifteen, Chamberlain's explanation deserves some skepticism.) Chamberlain soon returned, but Kansas fell to Kansas State on February 3 in an epic double-overtime battle, seventy-nine to seventy-five. Hopes for Big Eight title and NCAA tournament berth were fizzling.⁶⁸

Weariness and inconsistency marked the season's final month. As Kansas fought for second place in the Big Eight, Chamberlain continued to dominate, grabbing a school-record thirty-six rebounds against Missouri. But he still bore the boos of rival fans, the gripes of sportswriters, the complaints of coaches, and the abuses of defenders. An Oklahoma State defender undercut him. A Missouri player bit him on the arm. At the end of February Kansas lost consecutive games to also-rans Nebraska and Iowa State. In Nebraska the university celebrated by cancelling classes. Kansas only dealt with dashed expectations.⁶⁹

A few diversions at least burnished Chamberlain's celebrity. According to Phog Allen, Chamberlain started receiving fifty or one hundred dollars for promotional appearances at nightclubs in Kansas City and Topeka. In February 1958 he also began his rock-and-roll radio show "Flip'er with Dipper" on Topeka station WREN. The show lasted only six weeks. Chamberlain denied being paid, but Kansas authorities grew nervous about providing more ammunition for NCAA investigators. The music, more-

64. Report No. 27, NCAA Committee on Infractions, October 17, 1960.

65. *University Daily Kansan*, May 7, 1957; *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 24, 1957; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 8, 1957.

66. *University Daily Kansan*, November 21, 1957, November 22, 1957; "Big Eight," *Sports Illustrated* (December 9, 1957): 49; *Sporting News*, November 27, 1957.

67. *University Daily Kansan*, December 3, 5, 16, 20, 1957, January 7, 1958; "Taller Than That," *Time* 70 (December 23, 1957): 41; "The 100 Per Center," *Newsweek* 50 (December 30, 1957): 43.

68. Chamberlain and Shaw, *Wilt*, 74–75; Wilt Chamberlain, *A View From Above* (New York: Villard Books, 1991), 251; *University Daily Kansan*, January 7, 8, 1958, January 14, 15, February 4, 1958; Jeremiah Tax, "Wilt Chamberlain," *Sports Illustrated* (February 10, 1958).

69. *University Daily Kansan*, February 3, 4, 17, 20, 24, 25, March 7, 1958.

over, represented the same cultural threats embodied by Chamberlain. Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry performed rhythm-driven music that mixed genres, attracted integrated audiences, and exuded sexual energy. Like Chamberlain, it upset traditionalists.⁷⁰

Chamberlain also anticipated the track and field season. The previous spring he had high-jumped six feet five inches to win the Big Seven title, and he had competed in the shot put, high jump, triple jump, sprint races, and the half-mile. Chamberlain loved track and field: he could display individual brilliance without relying on teammates or fighting off triple teams. He even contemplated playing AAU basketball after leaving Kansas to preserve amateur eligibility and compete in the 1960 Olympic decathlon. Chamberlain was such an outstanding athlete that a promoter offered him a fight against heavyweight boxing champion Floyd Patterson.⁷¹

Chamberlain last played in Allen Field House against Oklahoma on February 28, 1958, rescheduled for a Friday night so that he could compete in the Big Eight Indoor Championship. His team down forty-five to thirty-five with ten minutes left, Chamberlain scored the next fourteen points, finishing with thirty-two points and sixteen rebounds in a sixty to fifty-nine overtime victory. The next afternoon he arrived in Kansas City, took a few practice jumps, and leaped six feet six and a half inches— while



wearing a warm-up jacket and a pageboy cap. He set a university record and tied for first place.⁷²

In Chamberlain's final game, Kansas dismantled top-ranked Kansas State in Manhattan, sixty-one to forty-four. Still, a mood of wistful melancholy pervaded the locker room; no one cheered, no one laughed. Kansas State had already clinched the conference's NCAA tournament berth. Chamberlain again won first-team All-America, and countless coaches testified to his greatness. But Kansas would not win the national championship. Basketball survived Chamberlain.⁷³

The Jayhawks went forty-two and eight during Chamberlain's two years, but what might have been? The eight losses were by only twenty-one total points, and Kansas had lost the 1957 title to North Carolina by one excruciating point. Chamberlain himself carried a bulky sack of frustrations: his team's near-misses, his opponents' tactics, his fans' expectations. His departure, marked by all the signposts of his burgeoning celebrity, also seemed tinged with failure.⁷⁴

70. *Topeka Capital*, April 29, 1960; *University Daily Kansan*, February 14, 1958; *Lawrence Journal-World*, February 21, 1958; *Kansas City Star*, January 17, 1998; Falkenstein interview; Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2000), 41–92.

71. *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 11, 1957; *University Daily Kansan*, May 29, 1957; George Metzger, "Stilt Likely to Try AAU Cage First," *Sporting News* (December 25, 1957); *New York Times*, December 14, 1957; Libby, *Goliath*, 50.

72. *Kansas Alumni*, April 1982, in 1998 folder, Wilt Chamberlain [Biographical] file; Chamberlain, *A View From Above*, 18–21.

73. *New York Times*, March 6, 1958; *University Daily Kansan*, February 4, March 3, 5, 10, 1958; *Lawrence Journal-World*, March 5, 1958.

74. Unidentified article, February 24, 1992, in 1993 folder, Wilt Chamberlain [Biographical] file; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 71–72; *Kansas City Star*, May 26, 1958.

As early as the preseason Big Eight tournament, Bob Billings knew that Chamberlain would skip his senior year. The burdens had grown too heavy and the disappointments too bitter. "He had been under constant pressure for a long time," reflected Billings. "He seemed rather relieved that it was all over." But the saga stretched throughout the spring of 1958, blowing around in the now-typical storm of rumor and suspicion. Chamberlain had sold the exclusive story of his departure for ten thousand dollars to *Look* magazine. By contract, he could not comment on his departure until the story ran in late May. On May 6 the *Denver Post* reported that he was leaving Kansas. The Harlem Globetrotters again sought his services. A company that sponsored an AAU team offered him a forty-thousand-dollar-a-year job. A Seattle psychologist arranged a potential all-star European tour headlined by Chamberlain. Bound by *Look*, Chamberlain kept insisting that he was returning to Kansas.⁷⁵

The gossip escalated to the point that *Look* released the article "Why I Am Quitting College" three days early. Chamberlain explained his frustration with stall tactics and cheap shots. "The game I was forced to play at K.U. wasn't basketball," he wrote. "It was hurting my chances of ever developing into a professional player." He described some racist baiting, though he believed that he had helped "promote interracial good will." He bemoaned the recruiting process and the NCAA investigation. And he announced a 160-game barnstorming tour, starting in South America, between a team of black players and a team of whites. The tour promoter estimated a gross of \$250,000.⁷⁶

Kansas fans felt betrayed. Basketball players almost never left college early. That the culprit was a colossal black man may have damaged the liberal integrationist hope that Chamberlain had once symbolized to Lawrence. Chamberlain's departure, too, seemed to threaten college basketball: he had to promise not to lure other collegians onto barnstorming teams. He also apologized for misleading Kansas fans, citing his contract with *Look*, and praised

Dick Harp, emphasizing that his basketball complaints regarded only his opponents. Chamberlain soon pulled up to Harp's home in a shiny, new, red Oldsmobile convertible. They said goodbye, each man relieved that the cloud of expectations had lifted. Then Chamberlain drove off toward Philadelphia, the University of Kansas in his rear-view mirror.⁷⁷

Weeks later, at Toots Shor's in New York City, Abe Saperstein stood before a throng of reporters. "Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet the newest member of the Harlem Globetrotters." Wilt Chamberlain emerged from behind a curtain, dressed in a red, white, and blue satin warm-up, palming two basketballs and posing for reporters. Chamberlain had scrapped the barnstorming tour, instead signing a sixty-five-thousand-dollar contract. He would cherish his year with the Globetrotters. They never lost. Their opponents were blank canvasses for their comic paintings. No coach constructed game plans to negate Chamberlain, and no fans expected anything besides entertaining basketball. Chamberlain could simply display athletic brilliance—a vacation from the pressure-packed Kansas years.⁷⁸

Yet a burden remained. After a dragged-out investigation, the NCAA placed the University of Kansas on probation in October 1960, banning the basketball team from the national tournament for two years. The NCAA claimed that university representatives covered the fifteen-hundred-dollar difference between Chamberlain's 1953 and 1956 cars. In Kansas the verdict seemed an inevitable consequence of Chamberlain's tenure—an infestation of modern temptation, a time of awe and hype and rumor. "Since that day in September of 1955 when a seven-foot basketball player drove the second of his seven cars onto the University of Kansas campus," sighed the *Topeka Daily Capital*, "the Jayhawks' head has been resting squarely on the chopping block."⁷⁹

75. Billings, "My Friend, Wilt Chamberlain"; *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 8, 1958; Wilt Chamberlain as told to Tim Cohane, "Basketball Has Ganged Up On Me," *Look* 24 (March 1, 1960): 55; *University Daily Kansan*, May 9, 1958.

76. *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 23, 1958; Chamberlain with Cohane and McVay, "Why I Am Quitting College," 91–101.

77. *Lawrence Journal-World*, May 23, 24, 26, 1958; *University Daily Kansan*, June 9, 1959; *Kansas City Star*, May 25, 1958; *New York Times*, May 24, 1958; *Kansas City Times*, May 24, 1958; Falkenstein, *Max and the Jayhawks*, 71–72; Waugh interview.

78. *New York Times*, June 19, 1958, July 9, August 1, 1959; *Kansas City Star*, June 18, 1958; *Kansas City Times*, June 19, 1958; Chamberlain as told to Cohane, "Basketball Has Ganged Up On Me," 55–58.

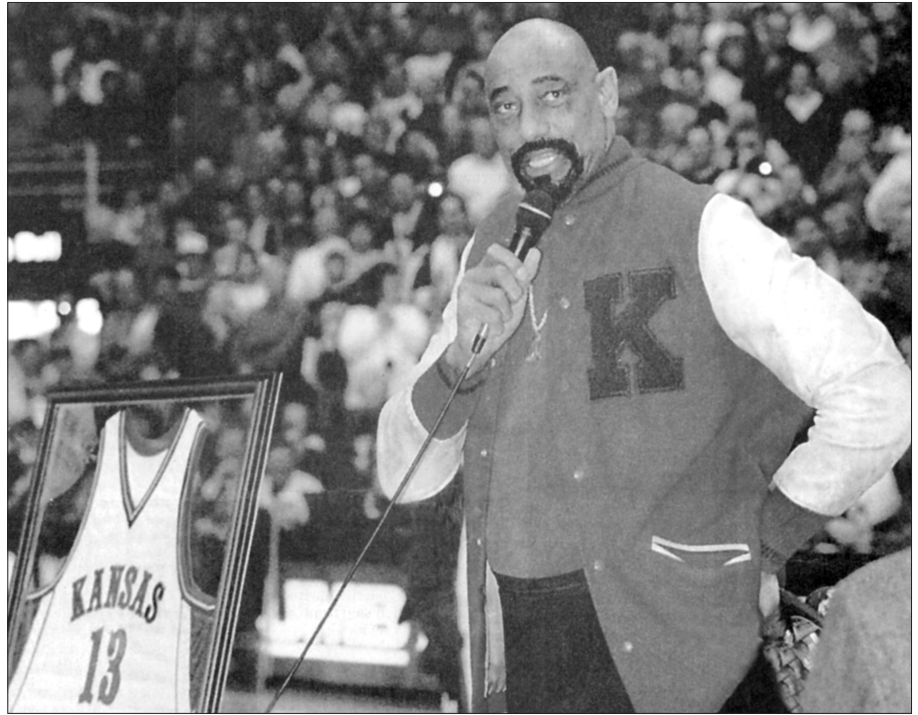
79. Walter Byers to W. Clarke Wescoe, October 21, 1960, Athletic Office (NCAA), Chancellor Wescoe Correspondence Departmental, 1960/61; *New York Times*, October 27, 1960; *Topeka Capital*, October 27, 28, 1960.

Chamberlain rarely returned to the University of Kansas, but in 1998 he agreed to a ceremony retiring his number at halftime during a game against Kansas State. "I hope they don't boo me," he confessed beforehand. Instead he was washed in a sea of affection. "I'm humbled and deeply honored," he responded. "Rock chalk, Jayhawk."

By that time Chamberlain had played a year with the Philadelphia Warriors and won the MVP award. He labeled the NCAA findings "ridiculous," even contradicting the university's admission that he had bought the 1956 Oldsmobile. Throughout his life the line between truth and hyperbole stayed shrouded. In 1965 he claimed to have received only a campus job paying fifteen dollars a month. In 1973 he wrote that alumni paid him between fifteen- and twenty-thousand dollars. In 1985 he said that various "godfathers" had slipped him around four thousand dollars.⁸⁰

The contradictions exemplified Chamberlain's frustrating, beguiling public image. He would become the Babe Ruth of basketball, a man of mythic size, strength, and virility. He would amass eye-popping statistics—scoring one hundred points in one game, averaging fifty points over one season. But he would also grow ever more sensitive. He would keep complaining that brutal opponents ruined the game, that fans unfairly cast him as a villain. He would win two NBA championships, but his rival Bill Russell would win eleven. For all his greatness, he would become the human embodiment of unmet expectations. That mythology first developed in Kansas from 1955 to 1958.

So Chamberlain long resented the University of Kansas. He rarely returned to campus. But in 1998, perhaps



aware of his impending mortality, Chamberlain agreed to a ceremony retiring his number at halftime during a game against Kansas State. "I hope they don't boo me," he confessed beforehand. Instead he was washed in a sea of affection. Wearing his old KU letter jacket, his gaunt eyes welling with tears, his *basso profundo* voice cracking, he addressed the crowd. He had once believed that he had let down the people of Kansas. "But when I come back here today and realize not the simple loss of a game, but how many people have shown such appreciation and warmth, I'm humbled and deeply honored." He related his pride in the university's basketball tradition. Forty years later, he felt a part of it. "Rock chalk, Jayhawk," he ended.⁸¹

The crowd roared. His Kansas years had torn deep wounds. Finally, those wounds had healed. [KH]

80. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 28, 1960; Wilt Chamberlain with Bob Ottum, "I Love the Game, Baby . . . But It Can't Go On This Way," *Sports Illustrated* (April 19, 1965); Chamberlain, *Wilt*, 48; *New York Times*, October 28, 1960, October 18, 19, 1985.

81. *University Daily Kansan*, May 3, 1993, January 20, 1998; undated article from AP Sports, Wilt Chamberlain File, Basketball Hall of Fame, Springfield, Massachusetts; Frank Deford, "A Gentle Goliath," *Sports Illustrated* (October 25, 1999): 80–82; Falkenstein interview; Mayer interview.